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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 001991

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: OMAN'S NEW MINISTER: "THE RIGHT WOMAN AT THE RIGHT TIME"

REF: MUSCAT 01899

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Dr. Sharifa bint Khalfan bin Nasser al-Yahyai, Oman's new Minister of Social Development, is still getting used to her new job. Working late into the Ramadan nights to get up to speed on the workings of her ministry, she reflected on her sudden transition from academia to a senior position in government. While understandably reluctant to talk shop until she has fully mastered her brief, Dr. Sharifa enthusiastically expounded on the growing role of women in Omani society, while retaining their prominent role in family life. END SUMMARY.

SHOCK AND AWE

2. (SBU) On November 7, the Ambassador and PolOff called on the new Minister of Social Development, Dr. Sharifa al-Yahyai. Dr. Sharifa was appointed to the Ministry on October 20; subsequently, she has been busy getting to know what she calls the "basics" of the Ministry. When asked about her appointment, Dr. Sharifa recalled being completely unaware of the pending announcement and confessed that, indeed, she had been "shocked." Describing that fateful day in detail, Dr. Sharifa said she received a call from the Royal Diwan early in the morning on October 20 and was requested to report there (on the opposite end of Muscat from her residence) within 45 minutes, without any reason given for her presence. She gleefully described racing her car with a police escort over 160 km/hour into Old Muscat.

3. (SBU) Arriving at the Diwan a few minutes late, Dr. Sharifa said she knew only that something very good -- or very bad -- would require such a summons. Moments later, Dr. Sharifa was informed of Sultan Qaboos' decision to honor her with the appointment as new Minister of Social Development. Dr. Sharifa recalled saying that she had to think about it, but was then quickly reminded that propriety hardly afforded her the option of declining the honor. She recounted, "It was like freezing water had been dropped on me. I couldn't sleep for three nights thinking about how I'm going to deal with these things." Within two hours of her appointment, Dr. Sharifa was moved out of her modest housing near Sultan Qaboos University and into temporary quarters more suitable for a minister. (Note: Several sources have said that new ministers receive signing bonuses anywhere from \$1.5 to \$2.5 million in addition to a plot of land for building a new home. End Note.)

THE RIGHT WOMAN FOR THE RIGHT JOB

4. (U) When asked why she thought she was chosen, Dr. Sharifa said she believes Omani women are finally taking their rightful place in society. "Women are getting positions to serve the right people at the right time." She referred to Sultan Qaboos as visionary and pointed out that there are now a good number of female ministers, women of great maturity, respect and intelligence.

ALL IN GOOD TIME

5. (SBU) Dr. Sharifa declined to discuss her Ministry's work until she had more time to study the major issues, including the problem of the lengthy registration process for non-governmental organizations (NGO), and the current status of her Ministry's help to identify students for the U.S. Embassy's English-language micro-scholarship program. When asked about her children or her academic years, she was engaging and enthusiastic. Dr. Sharifa was also animated in recounting her trip to England last summer with her two children and her wish sometimes that she were still in school.

6. (U) Dr. Sharifa shared her thoughts about women's empowerment and gender studies, including the need for more

critical analysis of women in society and their roles as mothers and wives. Dr. Sharifa said that she believes some societies see women as second class citizens and that only through reading, writing about, and understanding their legitimate role will women attain full rights.

17. (U) At the end of the meeting, Dr. Sharifa said she feels increasingly confident that she is approaching the time when she will be ready to "act on these things," pointing to the mounds of paperwork on her desk. The Ambassador underscored the Embassy's close relationship with the Ministry and our commitment to continuing our partnership. Dr. Sharifa agreed, but lamented the fact that she must first understand what's going on in her Ministry before getting down to the real work of helping the people.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) Dr. Sharifa's is a very impressive individual who is already thinking in the long term. Although she did not indicate at what point a new Under Secretary will help share the burden, she appears to be a quick study who will minimize the time it will take to parlay fourteen years in academia to her new career in public service.

BALTIMORE